

The Boy Next Door by Lillington_x

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Erica Sinclair, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Female Character(s), Original Female Character(s) of Color, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Original Female Character(s), Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Original Female Character(s)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2021-04-05

Updated: 2021-05-29

Packaged: 2022-03-31 20:36:12

Rating: General Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 6

Words: 12,064

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

1. Chapter 1

“Where is he?” I asked as I stepped into the house party. Most of my schoolmates ignored the question and kept dancing to the loud rock music blasting from the speakers positioned around the lavish living room. I locked eyes with one of the tennis players dancing halfway up the crowded staircase.

“Kitchen!” he called out through cupped hands as soon he noticed my expectant gaze. I shot him a thumbs up and began shouldering through the crowd tightly packed into the tiny house. It wasn’t anything out of the norm for a Friday night after a ball game in Hawkins, but I was way out of my comfort zone. I hated these parties. I never went to them. If it weren’t for Claire calling to complain about my boyfriend vomiting in her parent’s pool, I wouldn’t be here. My boyfriend frequented the party scene to save himself from being bored, although I told him there was nothing wrong with staying in and watching a movie. My parents had even said they didn’t mind if he stayed over after since he was “one of the good guys” in their eyes.

The crowd seemed to thicken as I closed in on the kitchen. Everyone was shoulder to shoulder as though some important show was going on. Even on my toes, I couldn’t see over the sea of curious heads and multicolored backward ball caps.

“Hellooooo! Excuse me! Make a freaking hole!” I declared as I forced my way through the curious crowd. I pressed my hips between two football players taking up the doorway and nearly collapsed into the sweltering kitchen once I made my way through the burly players. The air tensed as I finally laid eyes on what everyone had been so fascinated by. In the middle of the kitchen stood my boyfriend making out with one of the varsity cheerleaders. My heart sank.

“Steve?” I called. Steve pulled away from Sandra’s lips and met my gaze. There was dried puke on his maroon sweater and her pink lipstick was all over his mouth.

“Wendy?” He seemed confused. “What-What are you doing here?”

"Claire called, but it doesn't look like you need my help anymore, huh?" I seethed.

"Wendy, this isn't what you think," Sandra quickly added. Despite her words and reddened cheeks, she was still clinging to Steve's arms as though her life depended on it. My eyes began to burn and I turned away from the two only to bump into Billy Hargrove's chest. The music scratched to silence. I could hear people shuffling about to see the second act of the drama that was unfolding.

"Sorry-" I muttered.

"Hold on, Wendy. You're gonna wanna see this," Billy said, brushing past as he marched into the room. Steve pried away from Sandra and took a few steps back, his palms up to defend himself.

"Come on, Hargrove. Please? You and I don't have any problems."

"Yeah. We do." Billy reared back a fist and punched Steve in the stomach. I winced, watching him double over as he squeaked on the air forcefully escaping his lungs. Billy kned him in the face then let him fall to the floor. Steve's hands flew to his nose as bright blood leaked between his pinched fingers. I turned away from the sight but this time the crowd gave way and let me through with ease. My chest hurt and I could feel hot tears welling in my eyes as I pushed outside through the front door.

The cool Fall air filled my lungs as I hurried down the sidewalk for my car. When I seemed far enough away, the music inside the stuffy house started blasting again. Just like that, the whole thing was behind everyone else and they were back to dancing and laughing while I sat in the driver's seat of my olive green Pinto on the dim street. There came a knock on my passenger window then the door popped open. Billy lowered himself into the passenger seat with a sigh. I hastily wiped at my damp face, embarrassment settling in as my cheeks burned.

"You didn't have to do that," I said with a sniffle.

"Harrington's been asking for it for weeks. I just needed a good enough reason," he claimed as he admired his reddening fist. I shook

my head and let out a deep, unsteady breath.

“Well... thank you, I suppose.”

“My pleasure,” he said with a smile. I looked over at him and found his sparkling eyes on me. His tongue slipped out to wet his pink lips and he tucked a few of his blond curls behind his pierced ear. I hated when he looked at me like that.

“Wanna talk about it?” he asked to which I immediately laughed.

“There isn’t anything to talk about, Billy. I appreciate what you did, but don’t think I owe you any special favors now.”

He looked confused. “Who said anything about favors? I asked if you wanted to talk.”

“I’m not dumb,” I said with a shake of my head. “Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean I don’t know all the stories about you with half the women in Hawkins, even the married ones.”

“It’s no secret women kind of throw themselves at me. What am I supposed to do?”

“Tell them no or turn them away!” I answered with a scoff.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he asked with a shrug. He reached over and twirled a bit of the end of my curly hair resting on my shoulder.

“What if someone out there treated your sister the way you treat women?” I dared ask. His eyes darkened and he pulled his hand away from me.

“Just like you, Max is smarter than them. I treat women how they want me to treat them and if they want me to fuck them all while knowing they’re not the only one, then who am I to deny them that privilege?” he explained with an air of nonchalance. I crossed my arms over my chest and nestled into the seat.

“Do you remember last month? When you caught Steve under the bleachers with Becky Hammond so I told him to stay the hell away from you? Which worked out up until you went back to him?” Billy

asked. I sighed heavily.

"I was trying to forget. Thanks for bringing that up again," I complained, stomach starting to churn at the refreshed memory.

"What makes Steve any better than me? Is it because he met your parents, wears stupid sweaters, doesn't smoke or drive a Camaro?"

"Alright, enough already," I tossed up my hands. "How much have you had to drink at the party?"

"Nothing other than water. I only went to Claire's to keep an eye on Steve for you," he answered with a small shake of his head. I couldn't formulate a response. He wasn't lying. I didn't smell any beer or other alcohol on him. He wasn't slurring or leering and his eyes were clear. I couldn't understand why he felt compelled to keep an eye on my boyfriend.

"No one said Steve was better than you," I finally let out.

"None of you have to SAY it. I can tell," he complained, his bright eyes falling to the messy floor mats of my car. "Everyone smiles in his face, but tuck their heads when they see me. If only they knew the stunts he pulled."

"Well, what do you want me to say, Billy? You carry this...this persona about you, like you feel like you have to try harder than-"

"*Try harder?*" he echoed, eyebrows raising and mouth widening in surprised mortification. "Steve 'the Hair' Harrington is the goddamn king of try hards. He gives and tells people what they think they want. I serve it to all of you straight up on a silver platter."

"What's your point? I'm not in the mood for your attitude. You know, you can be such a diva-"

"I'M a diva?" he shrieked, turning barely enough to face my head-on. "You just got humiliated in front of half the school for a second time. You know exactly how this could have been avoided, but here you sit with your feelings in your lap and tears in your eyes like a princess who didn't get her way when you should be lifting your goddamn head and getting over it! Stop feeling sorry for yourself when it's you

who got yourself into these jacked-up situations!"

Without warning, the passenger door flew open and Billy was yanked out of the seat.

"Don't yell at her!" came Steve's hoarse bellow as he slung Billy into the grass. My heart plummeted. Billy wasted no time in recovering and tackling Steve against the side of my car.

"Cut it out!" I threw open my door and quickly rounded the front of my vehicle. Nosy partygoers spilled out onto the lawn to watch the scuffle. Steve put Billy in a headlock until Billy threw a blow to his ribs and he released him. Billy grabbed him by his stained shirt and slung him onto the sidewalk before punching him in the face once more. Neither of the two were a stranger to taking hits. He rolled over and kicked Billy away from him then crawled toward me. I backed away. He looked at me incredulously, his unswollen eye widened.

"I'm sorry. Wendy, I'm sorry. Sandra? She's just..." He panted as he tried to catch his breath. "I didn't mean... I love you."

"Don't you dare," Billy growled as he limped near. There were blades of grass in his curly hair, a bruise on his left cheekbone, and his bottom lip was split. "Don't you fucking dare say it to her after what you did."

I stood between the two men. I couldn't stand to see any more fighting. It felt like the entire school was watching. My cheeks burned with humiliation.

"Wendy please," Steve pleaded from behind me. Billy stood tall, his fists by his sides as he watched Steve take a few shaky steps toward me. Without a word, I rounded my car and sat in the driver's seat. As Steve reached for the passenger door handle, I locked the doors and started the engine.

"Wendy?" He repeated. He glanced back at Billy and the crowd then knocked on the glass. My eyes burned. I clenched my teeth together, put the car in gear, and drove away from the party.

2. Chapter 2

When I woke up the next morning, I was still wearing my outfit from the party. A bit of Steve's blood was smeared on the sleeve of my yellow blouse. I groaned and looked at my alarm clock. It was just past ten in the morning. I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and shuffled to the bathroom across the hall. I stripped off the dirty clothes and stood under the stream of hot water in the shower as I recalled the night's events. My boyfriend... I sighed.

My ex-boyfriend cheated on me again and if I let him get away with it over and over, it would just become a habit for a world of hurt. My eyes began to burn but I didn't let myself cry. Billy was right. It wasn't something I ever thought I would think.

"He is right," I said aloud, trying to convince myself more. Not everyone was keen on Billy and Billy wasn't keen on most either, but he was my neighbor and in the few months he had been in Hawkins, I had grown on him. I missed the bus for school one morning and he came out of his house with his sister in tow. The tiny redhead asked me if I needed a ride and as Billy groveled under his voice, he waved me across the street to hop into the backseat of his sports car. There had been days when I knew I was on time for the bus or when Max preferred to skateboard and Billy still waved me over with not much to say. Who was I to decline a free ride outside of a smelly, rambunctious school bus?

Not everyone understood why Billy was the way he was, but I spent too many nights listening to his own father curse and beat him after school or when he got home from work. I shut off the shower and quickly got dressed. I peeked out of my bedroom window as I stepped into a pair of denim jeans. The blue Camaro wasn't parked across the street outside of his house. I wasn't sure if he ever came home after I left him at the party. I buttoned up a white blouse covered in pastel flowers then tucked it into the jeans and pulled my thick hair back with a headband.

I shuffled down the staircase.

"Hey sweetie," my mother greeted me from the kitchen.

“Good morning,” I sat down on one of the stools at the island and frowned. She slid a warm cup of tea my way and looked at me with her deep brown eyes.

“Alright. Let’s hear it,” she coaxed. I raised an eyebrow over the rim of my mug.

“Hear what?”

“Something is wrong. I’m a mom, I know everything.” She tapped her temple with a smirk. “Not to mention, you came running in the house like a bat out of hell last night, slammed your door shut, and didn’t come out until now. Your father was considering climbing through a window to talk to you. I told him you needed time.”

I lowered the mug from my lips and fidgeted with the ceramic handle. My leg began to nervously bounce up and down on the metal stool’s footing. My stomach did somersaults.

“I’m... I’m breaking up with Steve,” I finally let out. She stared at me, expressionless and silent.

“I know you and Dad love him but he’s...” I couldn’t find nice enough words. Anger and betrayal were starting to boil under my skin. My mother’s hands gently came down over my fidgeting fingers.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me if you don’t want to, honey. It’s okay,” she reassured me. “If you’re unhappy, do what makes you happy.”

“I just don’t want to hurt anyone,” I muttered.

“What about you?” she questioned. “You’ll hurt yourself worrying about other people. Sweetheart, you two are young. Steve is... well if you feel like you’ve outgrown him, let yourself outgrow him.”

“He’s cheated on me. Twice,” I finally revealed to my mother. She shrunk back, a hand flying to the chest of her black sweater as her face scrunched up in shock.

“That little...” she caught herself and shook her head. “With who?”

"Becky Hammond then Sandra Mills."

"Scamps. All of them. Just running around, jamming their tongues in everyone's mouths. They knew-" she caught herself as her voice quiver with agitation. "They knew the two of you were together. It's been what? A year?"

"And two months," I added covering my face with my hands. "I don't want to blame them. It's his irresponsibility. I've wasted over a year on this and now I just... I just don't know."

"You don't have to know everything. All you have to know is Steve doesn't deserve to call my baby girl his girlfriend."

"I dunno what to tell Dad. I don't want him to go knocking on the Harrington's front door," I muttered.

"I'll talk to him. You just focus on being happy." My mother rounded the counter and hugged me into her chest. "What do you have planned for the weekend to keep your mind occupied? I'm sorry I have to work tonight. You and I could've gone to a movie."

"I think I'm gonna drive around a bit, y'know, to clear my head. Maybe go to the mall," I lied. She nodded and hugged me again.

"You know where I am if you need me."

"Thanks, mom." I nodded and left the house.

"Good morning, Ms. Byers," I greeted as I approached her register. I sat a box of granola bars and a couple of bottled waters on the counter between us. The tired-looking brunette sent me a small smile.

"You're up early for a Saturday, Wendy. I heard you made it to that party at the Wilson's," she said.

"You hear anything else?" I asked, eyes wide. She paused in the middle of typing something into her cash register.

"You be careful around that Hargrove kid, okay?" she suggested. I pursed my lips as I felt ready to defend Billy with all my might the

same way he had defended me the night before.

"You don't know the whole story," I muttered. She bagged my groceries and handed them over the counter. I slid the money across the counter.

"You can keep the change," I let out before swiftly exiting the store. I could feel a seething frustration bubbling in my gut. No one knew Billy the way people knew Steve, but they never jumped at the accusations or assumptions for the two of them the same way.

I hadn't talked to Billy since last night. I knew where he was. There weren't many places to disappear to in Hawkins. The drive to the edge of town was uneventful and quiet. As I made the turn off the dirt road and into the graveled clearing, Billy's car came into view. It was parked right by the edge of the steep cliff. I parked my car a few feet to the right of his. I could see him sleeping in the reclined driver's seat with his denim jacket covering his head. I grabbed the plastic bag from the convenience store on my way here then approached his car. I knocked on the passenger window three times. The car bounced as he was startled awake, yanking the jacket off of his face. He looked up at me with a sleepy grimace then unlocked the doors.

"Did you spend the night out here?" I asked as I plopped into the passenger seat. He ran a hand over his sleepy face and fought with his eyes to adjust against the overcast sunlight trying to peek through the thickening clouds.

"What do you want?" he asked before a yawn won him over. I reached into the plastic bag and handed him water. He eagerly popped the top and downed half the drink in several gulps. I offered over the box of granola. He wasted no time ripping it open and starting in on one of the bars.

"I already beat Harrington's ass for you once. You trying to bribe me into doing it again?" he dryly joked.

"Once was enough. He got you a few good times," I remarked. His tongue darted out to wet the nick scabbing over in his bottom lip. The greenish bruise on his cheekbone would be gone by the time

tomorrow night got here. He looked over at me then shook his head.

“So what are you gonna do about him?”

“I thought about what you said last night and you’re right.” Billy’s eyes widened just slightly at my words as though he couldn’t believe someone was on his side for once.

“You mean it this time?” he asked. I rolled my eyes and leaned against the passenger door.

“Yeah.”

I could tell Billy didn’t completely believe me and I couldn’t blame him for the apprehension. I had gone back before. He lowered his eyes to the steering wheel and sighed.

“Well I hope you mean it, cause next time I won’t be around to kick his ass for you,” he claimed.

“Why not?” I asked.

“I’m leaving Hawkins.”

I stared at him, waiting for a laugh and for him to say it was a prank. He pointed over his shoulder. There sat a box full of trophies and a packed duffel bag in the backseat. My heart dropped.

“You can’t be serious,” I scoffed.

“I don’t want to go home,” he quietly added, staring through the windshield.

“So you’re leaving?” I was barely able to get the words out. I blinked and noticed my face was wet. He looked at me, confused.

“Why are you crying?”

I popped open the door and scrambled out the Camaro, slamming the door shut behind me. I began to pace.

“Will you chill out and talk to me?” came Billy’s voice. He marched

over the gravel and gently grabbed me by my arms. I swiped at my face and shoved away from him.

"You just got here," I said, quieter this time. I realized how stupid I looked crying over Billy Hargrove. I laughed to myself and shook my head. His bright blue eyes searched my face for anything else other than "you just got here".

"I want you to be happy, Billy. You do what makes you happy," I urged. "My mom gave me that advice this morning. If leaving Hawkins makes you happy, that's okay."

"What makes *you* happy? I need some more ideas," he tried.

"You," I let out as I leaned against the hatchback of my Pinto. Billy deflated. I saw it on his face.

"Wendy, what the hell-"

"Remember the first time you got me to sneak out of my house? We came up here to look at the stars in silence?" I asked him.

"Yeah, right after my dad and I got into it," he added.

"I helped bandage up your head then we almost fell asleep on the hood of your car," I explained. "But I made you stay awake 'cause I was worried you could have had a concussion. You're not all rage and lust, Billy."

His face hardened and he looked away from me. His fingertips grazed the almost unnoticeable, flesh-colored scar on his left temple.

"You like looking at the stars. You beat up people who hurt my feelings. You like using women's hairspray. When you laugh, your eyes crinkle in the corners and you place a hand on your stomach like you're gonna bust your gut. You're one of my best friends."

His eyes lowered to the ground and he swallowed hard.

"I noticed you stopped smoke cigarettes three weeks ago and you've been sober for two days now. Trying to keep your head clear so you can make a big decision?" I asked, trying to make light of the

situation.

“Trying to save money so I can get outta here. I don’t wanna go back to that house,” he let out. He turned back around to face me. He was fighting back tears.

“Billy-”

“You know what I go through.”

I fell silent and chewed on my bottom lip. He went through hell every time he went home. I heard it. It was hard not to hear it. The glass breaking. The walls being punched. The bruises being made. He was right and there was nothing I could do about it.

“When are you leaving?” I asked.

His face dropped. He opened his mouth to say something but hesitated. With a slight shake of his head, I watched his expression completely change.

“The sooner I can get away from all this bullshit, the better,” he quickly answered. Before anything else could be said, he turned on his heel and marched back to his car. My eyes burned as the Camaro’s engine roared to life. I watched him reverse away from the cliff and disappear down the road through the trees. The sound of the engine faded as he left and soon, I was alone with nothing but the sounds of the forest behind me and the lake below me. I let out a painful breath and stared at the treeline, waiting.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

TW: attempted sexual assault

“They disgust me,” Irene complained with a roll of her eyes.

“How do you think it makes me feel?” I added with a snarl. My childhood best friend, Nancy Wheeler, was making out with my ex-boyfriend. I had broken up with Steve in the student parking lot of our school the Monday following the weekend he had cheated on me for a second time. He took it surprisingly well. Probably because he couldn’t remember it since he immediately attached himself to Nancy not even a week later. Now, three months later, the two were nearly inseparable. Even at a bustling New Year’s Eve house party, they clung to each other like a bunch of honeymooners. I wasn’t even sure whose party it was. I had heard about it during home economics yesterday and invited myself.

Nancy squealed from across the room as Steve kissed her neck. I fumed and left the living room. I pushed into the kitchen and poured myself another drink from the punch bowl.

“Hey now. I thought you said that last cup was your last drink,” my friend warned. I hadn’t noticed she had even followed me. I could still hear Nancy in my head and grimaced as I chugged the spiked fruit punch.

“I’ll have you know that I know my limit, Irene,” I told her with a sweet, crooked smile. My chest was getting hot. The alcohol was setting in and I was finally starting to feel good. I poured myself another cup then peeled off my indigo coat.

“Looking good,” a not-so-familiar classmate said with a wink of his green eyes. He ran a slow hand across the lower back of my dandelion yellow t-shirt. I chugged what was something like my fifth cup and set it on the kitchen table then turned to the guy touching my knee.

“What’s ya name?” I sort of shouted and whispered in his ear over the music.

“Paul. You wanna get outta here?” He asked with a gentle tug on my waist. I inched away from Irene.

“Wait! Shouldn’t you-“

“I’ll be right ba-back,” I reassured her with a hiccup. Paul led the way through the party then up the staircase. It was quieter. The lights were dimmed all down the hallway. The edges of my vision were blurred. I could still hear Nancy somewhere. The room was dark. When did we leave the hall? Whose house was this? Paul trailed kisses down my neck as he unbuttoned my shirt. Whose bed was I on? Were those LEGO’s across the room?

“Martin Holmes said you got so nasty for him,” he said, tugging at my shirt.

“W-Who?” I asked, grabbing at his hands. He batted away my touch and the bed sank as he straddled my legs.

“Is it true you do chicks too?”

I couldn’t remember who I was with. He had just told me his name. I didn’t like this feeling. I had slipped past my limit too fast. The room was tilting. Paul’s hands were clammy on my bare belly. There it was. Paul. His locker was a few columns down from mine at the school.

“Paul. Wait,” I complained, tugging my shirt back down.

“Come on. They said you pick someone at every party, but *I* picked *you* this time,” Paul grew more aggressive in his approach and began to bear his weight down on top of me.

“Stop it. Get off me,” I ordered. He ripped my stockings and yanked up my plaid skirt.

“I said get OFF!” I repeated, scratching the side of his neck. He reared back a hand and struck me across the face.

"Calm down, you bitch," he spat as he swung. I laid there, stunned. My ears were ringing and I had substantially sobered up from the blow. No one had ever put their hands on me like that before. Paul kissed my neck and I heard the jingle of his belt coming undone. My heart jumped into my throat. I didn't want this. I sat up but he shoved me back down. I scampered across the mattress but he grabbed my ankle and pulled me right back.

"Help! Irene!" I hollered but I was sure no one could hear me over the loud music. Paul hovered over me and clapped a hand over my mouth. I panted through my nose, eyes wide with fear as I met his terrifying gaze.

"The more you struggle, the longer this'll take."

There came a knock at the door. I tried to yell over his hand on my mouth.

"Someone's in here!" he called over his shoulder. The locked doorknob barely moved. Paul made the mistake of separating his legs. He tried to push his thigh between both of mine but I swiftly brought my knee up between his, striking him in the groin. He groaned and let me go as he doubled over. I ran for the door and stumbled into the arms of a familiar face on the other side. Those sparkly blue eyes glared down at me from beneath his thick brows.

"Billy?" I whispered, suddenly breathless. He sidestepped me and marched into the room.

"Hargrove?" Paul questioned before Billy shoved him against the closet door.

"Stay the fuck away from her," he ordered. Paul snickered.

"Half the school has had her, dude. Wait your turn like the rest of us."

Billy hit him in the jaw. Irene rushed to my side and threw her arm around me.

"Oh my gosh. Your clothes. You're bleeding," she pressed a napkin to my nose. I stood there, stunned. Billy shoved Paul onto the bed and

left him where I was just forced to lay. He turned around and met my gaze with a stern but concerned look.

“Let me see...” he moved Irene's hand and more blood seeped out, dripping onto my shirt.

“For fuck sake... Look at you,” he complained though his gaze was soft.

“I’m gonna take her home,” Irene spoke up. He shook his head.

“She can’t go home like this. Her parents will lose their minds. I got her.”

“No offense but I don’t trust any guys around her right now,” Irene hissed. I grabbed Billy’s wrist. After all this time, it felt surprisingly good to just know he was here beside me.

“He’s okay. I’ll call you in the morning. I promise,” I reassured her. She watched Billy lead the way down the staircase and out of the house. I limped down the sidewalk behind him, still buzzed and embarrassed. My hips hurt from being pinned down. My whole head and face ached from Paul's unexpected blow.

“What are you doing here?” He asked. His voice was cold and he didn’t even turn to look at me. He was upset.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I shot back. “Thought Hawkins was a thing of the past for you.”

“And I thought partying wasn’t up your alley, but I guess I missed a couple of things since I’ve been gone,” he griped.

“If you’re gonna lecture me then leave like you did last time, can we skip the lecture part?” I hissed. He turned around to look at me and walked backward as he spoke.

“I didn’t leave you. I left my dad. What was Paul Newton talking about in there? What were you doing alone with that meathead?”

“He was drunk. He was talking nonsense,” I quickly spat out. He stopped walking and looked down his nose at me.

“Don’t lie to me. What’s happened to you?”

“It’s not like you’d give a damn what’s happened to me or not,” my anger was growing. I was so glad to see him but so damn angry he dared to show his face after leaving the way he did.

“I came back because I missed you. I couldn’t find you anywhere, so I drove around a bit and could hear the party from streets away. I didn’t expect to find you but it was worth double-checking,” he explained.

“You missed me?” I asked, heart fluttering. He looked at me like a deer in headlights. He wasn’t even aware he had said it. It sounded so natural. He ran his hands through his hair and sighed.

“Yeah. I missed you. I miss you. You were my best friend, my only friend, and I thought...” he huffed, fighting with himself as he put his hands on his hips. “Can we get you cleaned up or something? I can’t keep looking at you covered in blood with your clothes ripped up and shit.”

His car was a few more paces down the road. He opened the passenger door for me and I carefully lowered myself into the seat. Under the pale orange light, I could see bruises from Paul’s grip starting to pop up on my thighs beneath my ripped stockings. I looked in the side-view mirror at the dried blood caked under my nose. My hair was wild. My face was reddened and my cheekbone was smeared with a pale green bruise.

“You reek of alcohol,” he complained from the driver’s seat.

“I had a few,” I claimed with a shrug.

“A few?” He echoed incredulously. He opened his mouth to speak again but closed it. Without a word, he started the engine and pulled away from the curb. He drummed his thumb against the steering wheel. His left arm hung out the window, lightly tapping the side of the car as we breezed through town. Watching the lights pass started to make me dizzy so I closed my eyes. I had never been so drunk before. I was surrounded by his scent and it wasn’t helping. It made my chest hurt. I hadn’t seen my best friend in three months. I had

missed him but this wasn't the reunion I wanted us to have.

"Is it true?"

I opened my eyes and looked over at him. "Is what true?"

"What Paul said about you being with half the school."

"No," I answered. "Not half the school, anyway, and if anything, most of us only kissed before I ditched the parties to go home."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why'd you change?"

I chuckled to myself and shook my head. "What's the matter, Billy? You used to do the same thing."

"Because I was trying to make up for something," he blatantly answered. "My dad made me feel like shit, like I couldn't be a man. So I did things that made me feel like one."

I hadn't expected him to be so open. I didn't want to answer his question. I burped and my stomach lurched.

"Oh no..." I warned, unbuckling my seatbelt. He jerked the car to a stop onto the shoulder of an empty road. I popped open the door and gagged before throwing up. I heaved my guts out, tears pouring out of my eyes as my throat burned on the regurgitated fruit punch and alcohol. I dug my fingernails into the leather seat to brace myself as I finished with a shudder.

"Oh god..." I whispered. I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand and leaned back in the seat with a disgusting sigh. A wave of emotion came over me and my chin trembled before I sniffled then the dam in my eyes broke.

"Fucking hell, Wendy-" he started up.

"I missed you so much that I had to do something to forget you," I

claimed, finally answering his question. "You were my best friend and it hurt like hell to know you were gone, to know you could just disconnect from me in an instant. An-And part of me just..." I rolled my eyes and wiped vomit from the corner of my mouth. "Part of me hated every woman who knew your touch and your kiss 'cause I wanted it. I wanted it to be me, but just me! I know that sounds incredibly selfish and naive and dumb...but I couldn't stand knowing you were hurting and that I couldn't be part of the solution but everyone else could be! Then you left and it hurt but when I realized I could forget about wanting anything to do with you by doing certain things, I just kept doing 'em."

He didn't say anything, his eyes wide and focused on me. I swallowed hard, quickly wiping my face dry as my heartbeat thudded in my ears. I had finally broken and spilled out what I had been holding on to for too long now. Even before he left, I had started to realize what I felt for him. I thought him leaving would help the both of us. I thought my feelings would fade but they just got stronger. I swallowed hard against nausea and crossed my arms over my chest. I felt like hell. I wanted to go home, but he was right. I couldn't go like this without raising too many questions and taking some kind of punishment.

"That ain't you, Wendy," he quietly said with a shake of his head. He looked disgusted or angry. I couldn't quite tell through my tears. I slammed my door and put my seatbelt back on then scrambled to wipe my face dry before I faced him.

"Are you back? For good?" I asked.

"No. I just bought a house in San Diego, where I grew up. That's why I stopped smoking and drinking before I left, so I could save money to get us a place," he explained.

"You're not very funny," I said with a shake of my head and a grimace.

"I'm serious, Wendy. After you finish school in a couple months..." he fiddled with the peeling emblem in the middle of the steering wheel, eyes everywhere except on me. He was nervous. "I was thinking you could move to California with me."

I thought I'd puke again.

"I did some thinking while I was away. It's crazy how clear your head gets when someone isn't trying to pummel it in," he dryly joked. "I missed you. A lot. A few times, I wanted to come back but I knew it wouldn't be just you waiting for me. I didn't wanna face him and worry about him ruining everything or taking me away from you."

"I don't understand."

"He'll kill me. If he sees me after all this time or finds out I'm even remotely...happy in some way. My dad will do whatever he can to ruin it. I don't want him to do that to you too. You mean too much to me."

My eyes widened in surprise. Was I hearing things? Surely I was still drunk. He laughed at the expression on my face.

"Did you think I tried to protect you, check on you, and beat up your ex for fun?" he asked. "I thought it was obvious."

"It's kind of hard to pick up cues when you're rolling around with half the town."

"I wasn't ready to deal with it. I didn't want to hurt you. You're not like those women, Wendy. You deserve better."

"And you do too!" I interjected. "You deserve to know peace and happiness, so I understand why you left. I wish you would've just talked to me."

"I didn't know how to. No one's ever given me the chance," he solemnly explained. He tugged at the curls resting at the back of his neck before leaning forward and resting his face in his arms on the steering wheel.

"Wendy, I can't stay long. You know Hawkins. You know how fast word gets around. Everyone will know I'm back in town by morning. My father will hear and he'll start looking. I gotta get back on the road. I've gotta get back to my classes and my job. I need an answer."

"Billy, I don't know. The last three months, I just..." I slightly shook

my head before I turned to him. Before I could gather my thoughts, he leaned over the center console and pressed his lips against mine in an unexpected kiss. It was over and done with half a second later as he pulled away, his freckled cheeks blushing a deep maroon color. He pressed his back against his seat and wrapped his fingers tight around the wheel in front of him.

"I missed you too," I replied, fighting with panic and relief. Billy and I had never even hugged before.

"You don't have to answer my first question tonight. but can you... at least stay at my motel with me? If I take you home like this, your mom will turn the whole town over," he suggested. It was the first time I ever heard a tremble in his voice. I looked down at my torn clothing. The pain radiating in my face was still fresh. The leftover alcohol settling in my gut was tearing my stomach to pieces. He wasn't wrong.

4. Chapter 4

The rundown Hawkins Midnight Motel was a slate gray, one-story building on the edge of town. I had heard stories about Billy bringing women here for “fun”. I never imagined myself coming to this place with him, but now I knew he would never do anything to hurt me. Especially after what had happened tonight.

The door to the motel room squeaked as Billy pushed it open after turning his key in the lock. He dashed inside in front of me and quickly swiped up old clothing and sports magazines strewn all over the place.

“You can sleep on the bed. I’ll take the chair,” he explained as he tossed his messy belongings into a corner of the dim motel room. He switched on a lamp by the bed and I felt his face stiffen once his gaze landed on me again.

I froze in the doorway. My tongue felt thick and glued to the roof of my mouth. He crossed the carpet in several quick strides then placed a gentle hand on my lower back to guide me into the room so the door could shut behind us. I heard the lock click shut.

“It’s alright...” he softly said. “I just wanna make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” I shot back.

“Bullshit, Wendy,” he rebutted. “I could hear your screams. And the look on your eyes when I opened that bedroom door with Paul beet red in the face behind you... What happened in there?”

My gaze shifted to the floor and I folded my arms tighter around myself as I felt my chest grow tight.

“That’s what I thought,” he barely nodded. His chest swelled with anger and he kicked a leg of the wooden coffee table. I jumped.

“I’m sorry,” he quickly apologized as he steadied his ragged breathing. “Just imagining that piece of shit-“

“I’m okay, Billy,” I lied. I could still feel Paul’s weight on top of me.

He had hurt me and had plans on hurting me in worse ways. I had a pretty good idea of what would have happened if Billy had not shown up.

“Thank you for helping me,” I spoke up. He tossed one last magazine onto the coffee table cluttered with empty plastic cups and balled up napkins before he turned to look at me, eyebrows raised.

“Paul’s gonna pay for what he did to you,” he warned.

“He didn’t do anything.”

“Then he’ll pay for what he tried to do. Come on,” he started toward the bathroom. “I really can’t see you like this. It pisses me off.”

I heard the shower start up. He yanked a duffel bag onto the closed toilet seat lid and dug through a heap of clothing. I leaned against the doorway, unsure of where to rest my gaze. After a moment, Billy offered over a large, black sweatshirt and emerald green basketball shorts.

“All I got,” he said. “And men’s body wash, but it beats smelling like alcohol the rest of the night.”

I took the shirt and he left the smaller room without another word. I felt his eyes linger on my torn stockings before he closed the bathroom door. I didn’t take off any of my clothes until his muffled footsteps faded across the room on the other side of the door.

With shaky hands, I unhooked my belt and my skirt fell to the cheap linoleum floor. I peeled my blouse over my head. My blood had trailed down my nose and between my breasts, where it was dry and flaking in a thin layer of dark crimson. There were green bruises on my hipbones and thighs. A red, warm welt rested on my cheek from Paul striking me. My vision began to blur as I felt the urge to cry.

I didn’t recognize myself anymore. I didn’t feel like myself, and it wasn’t just the alcohol in my system. I thought I was happy but I hadn’t felt a shred of genuine happiness until I saw those ocean blue eyes on the other side of that door again. Until I felt those wide hands pulling me away from danger. I had been running away from

something I didn't even know existed.

'Did you think I tried to protect you, check on you, and beat up your ex for fun?' The words replayed in my head now like the vague memories had done for the previous months. Despite the alcohol, the tears and vomit, the shock of it all, I couldn't forget what he had said to me in the car. It made me want to collapse. It filled me with relief. It made me angry. I wish he had just talked to me instead of running away. I understood why, but I was so damn angry. There was so much to talk about...

I stepped under the stream of hot water and carefully lathered my bruised skin. My tensed muscles finally began to relax as I consciously reminded myself of where I was and that I was safe. The water ran pink as I rinsed away the blood on my skin. I winced as I wiped at my cheek. My jaw ached.

"Come on, Wendy. You gotta rest," came his voice from the room. I switched off the shower then quickly dried off and stepped back into my under clothes. I stepped into the shorts and slipped his sweatshirt over my head. It all smelled like him, a faint hint of cigarette smoke and department store cologne. And Farrah Fawcett hairspray. I felt the corner of my mouth twitch up into a smile.

Pushing into the motel room, I found Billy struggling to neaten the bed. He had strewn a bed sheet over the chair in the corner for himself.

"Have you eaten?" he asked as he fluffed up the thin pillows.

"I'm not hungry."

"We'll grab some breakfast before I drop you off in the morning. I gotta hit the road tomorrow but I'll be back in town next weekend," he explained before his mouth gave way to a yawn.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why're you coming back?" I asked. I fidgeted where I stood, a few feet away from him and unsure of where to rest my eyes.

“To see you, dummy.”

“Why?” I asked.

He dropped the pillow and raked his fingers through his long hair, an exasperated sigh escaping his lips. His tight fists planted themselves on his hips.

“You’re gonna make me say it, Wen?”

“Say what?” My mind was racing - trying to catch up to his previous confession not matching his previous actions, the trauma of tonight’s attack, and the early workings of a nauseous hangover.

“I like you. Fucks sake, for someone on the principal’s list, you sure miss a lot of the obvious signs,” he grumbled. I could just barely make out his cheeks burning bright pink in the dim light.

“I wanna come back and see you. If that’s what you want too?”

His desperate gaze darted all over my face, searching for reassurance and acceptance. His hands met in front of him, his fingers nervously fidgeting with one another.

“Okay,” was all I managed to say. His teeth dug into his bottom lip before he took a step back and gestured toward the bed. Without a word, I laid beneath the off-white blanket then watched him cross the room to get comfortable in the dirt brown recliner. The lamp switched off with a small click, engulfing the room in darkness. The moon fought to send silver slivers of light between the cracks in the dusty blinds covering the wide window.

My eyes bore into the plain white ceiling above us as my mind began to sober and wander. Had he been more afraid to leave or to stay because of his feelings? Or his father? His father. The brute of a man would have eventually killed him if he hadn’t left. He had gotten so close to doing so before. I remembered watching Billy stumble to his car countless times before he sped off into the night. I always followed, curiosity and a painful desire to help him driving me to go to the place I know he ran to despite how tired or scared I always felt.

California? States away. Had Billy been afraid then? All alone? And his poor sister. Max stayed with the Wheelers or Sinclair's for weeks at time while her brother had been gone. Did she know her protector was back? He should have taken her. But he always had so much on his plate. Her friends made sure she was okay.

Billy didn't have many of those. As soon as some of his jock "friends" caught a whiff of my reckless extracurricular activities to cope with his absence, they had come swooping in with groping hands and hungry eyes. My teeth used to ache after the aggressive kisses. I always stopped them when they reached for my clothes, except Paul. In Billy's absence, he had made captain of the basketball team and was much stronger than me after a few drinks. He and Paul used to play ball together after school. Paul... Malcolm... Mitch... Tommy... There had been so many who I tried to just help me forget...

"Wendy?"

His voice jarred me from my thoughts. He was staring at me from his place in the chair, eyes soft and brow creased with worry. He had shed his jacket and sweater. The moonlight illuminated the parts of his freshly tanned arms and chest not covered by the pale green tank top barely clinging to his fit frame.

"You're crying in your sleep," he announced. Sure enough, my hand came up wet when I swiped at my cheeks.

"I'm not asleep," I begrudgingly let out. I turned my back to him as more hot tears escaped my eyes.

Silence. Then the mattress squeaked as it gave way beneath his weight. I shrunk back in defense and sat up on the edge of my bed.

"I don't want to--"

"I'm not... I'm..." he let out a quiet huff and tucked his head. "That's the furthest thing from my mind right now, Wen. I'm not those other punks and you're not those other women. Just let me be there for you tonight. I'm sorry I left you. Okay?"

I turned just enough to look him in the face. He was half kneeling,

half standing on the opposite side of the bed. Even in the dim light, I could make out the sincerity smeared across his stern features.

“Don’t make me beg?” he pleaded with a small shake of his head.

I swung my legs back into the bed and lifted the blanket as his invitation. He seemed surprised before he hardened his expression and shimmied beneath the bedding. He laid flat on his back then lifted his right arm, beckoning with his other hand for me to cozy up against his side.

As soon as my head nestled into the crook of his soft shoulder and warm neck, his body went rigid. He swallowed hard then cleared his throat. My heart was hammering a million miles a second. He wanted to be here, he wanted to be there for me. The same way I had been there for him. Bandages his cuts, icing his bruised knuckles, and telling him he wasn’t a bad person after his father sent him running scared to sleep in his car at the quarry.

His calloused left hand reached over and took my right wrist in his gentle grasp. He pulled my arm until it rested comfortably across his torso. Goosebumps dotted up my arms from my fingertips.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Are you?” I shot back.

“I never thought I’d...” he barely shook his head again. “I will be, Wen. Get some sleep.”

5. Chapter 5

“Stop! NO!”

Billy's pained screams jolted me out of my restless sleep. From his spot by my side, he slowly sat upright against the springy mattress then ran a palm down his sweaty face. I propped myself up on my elbows to look at him without a word as I waited for my own heart rate to slow down. It took a moment for his shaky panting to quiet.

“Nightmares,” he muttered. He dug the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“What're they about?” I asked. I could only imagine.

“Nothing,” he hurriedly answered, although I knew he was lying. He eyed the digital clock on the bedside table. “I gotta get you home so I can make my flight.”

He began to gather his belongings strewn about the room. I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to steady my foggy brain. Last night's alcohol had set a film of bile to sit on the back of my tongue. My bruised legs ached and the sudden awakening hadn't eased my pounding headache. The cheap rum from the party sent hot bubbles to churn in my gut. I needed to distract myself to save myself from throwing up in front of him.

“What's in California?” I decided to ask.

“My own place, night classes, my job,” he explained as he fiddled with the belt to his jeans.

“Where do you work?”

“Part-time at a surf shack along the beach. Part-time library bookkeeper at my school,” he answered. The latter caught me by surprise.

“You have much time for school?” The questions were coming effortlessly now. Sleeping beside the tormented giant made his presence much more real after such an extended absence. I knew our

time was coming to an end. I just wanted to bask in as much of it as possible. I wondered if he would really come back another time like he said he would. I recalled the question he had asked me last night. There was still so much to consider, so much to discuss. I couldn't formulate a clear answer with the urge to vomit tugging at my nerves.

"Fast-tracked a bunch of high school classes so I could graduate early - last month actually. I'm taking night classes at community college now," he finally answered.

"To become what?"

I caught a slight twinkle fill his eyes as he noticed my curiosity.

"A mechanic."

"You were pretty handy when my Olive needed a fix," I noted, remembering the half dozen times he had fixed something on my car. "I bet class is a breeze."

"Better than being bored and beat to death in Hawkins for the rest of my life."

"Hawkins isn't that bad. I mean, I'm here," I tried.

"Not for much longer if I have anything to do with it," he said before shooting me a wink. Butterflies filled my gut. There was the cocky meathead I had called my best friend. I wondered if he still thought we were best friends. He had kissed me. The sudden memory coming whirling back at me made my eyebrows twitch. The thought of asking him about it sent my hot insides twirling.

"I'm just kidding. You don't have to come if you don't wanna," he added.

"Who said I didn't wanna?" I quickly asked. "Let me graduate first and we'll see where time takes me."

"Takes *us*," he corrected. "Come on, Wen. I'm trying here. I've never done this before."

“Done what?” I raised an eyebrow.

“Y’know, dated someone I actually like,” he answered as he stepped into his boots. “I dunno how this shit works. I’m used to ladies throwing themselves at me.”

I laughed out loud, clapping a hand to my forehead. “You telling me I’m making this too difficult for you? You never took out any of the women you slept with?”

“Did you let any of the guys you made out with at the parties take you out?” he fired back, a smoldering fire suddenly setting his eyes ablaze.

“You must know something. Let’s not forget everyone caught you on Mrs. Wheeler’s front porch one night.”

“She knew what she wanted-“

“Is that why she stood you up?”

Billy’s chest swelled in agitation. I finally pushed to my feet and began to gather my belongings, avoiding his gaze. As I tried to walk by, his arm shot out and he stopped me in my tracks with a fist closing around the end of his sweatshirt.

“Guess that wound is still fresh. Sorry,” he muttered as he glared at the motel room door.

“Fresh enough to not know how to take me out like you did them?”

“Are you jealous?” his mouth turned down into a stiff frown mixed with disgust. “They were lucky if I even bothered to open their door for them. You’re better than them.”

“Then figure your shit out,” I hissed before wrenching free of his grasp and slamming the bathroom door shut behind me. I could still smell the blood on my old clothing lying on the linoleum floor. I leaned against the sink and let out a deep breath I felt I had been holding since we had woken up. A knock came on the bathroom door.

"Wendy?"

"What?"

"They don't matter. None of 'em do, err, did. I just..." he let out a deep sigh and I heard the small thud of what was probably his forehead leaning against the door. "I liked you but I figured I wasn't your type. Watching you with Steve was annoying. Infuriating. I... I saw him with Marie before you caught him the first time. I wanted to tell you but I thought... What makes me any different than him?"

I cracked open the bathroom door, partly to escape the irony blood smell and partly to see him. "You had nothing and knew what you wanted. He had everything and still wasn't satisfied."

He blinked in disbelief at the words that had just left my mouth. Someone was on his side and after all the time that I had been, he still couldn't believe it.

"I really wanna kiss you again," he quietly muttered. I raised my chin to look him right in his eyes. The corners of his mouth twitched.

"The first one didn't count. All I tasted was cheap alcohol and puke," I felt my cheeks grow hot. "I might let you get a do-over if you come back to see me."

A wicked grin took over his face and creased his eyes. "Doubting me like everyone else always did?"

"No. I just don't like broken promises," I said, opening the door wider then extending a pinkie in his direction. He hesitated for a moment before wrapping his pinkie around my singular digit.

"Only if you promise me something too?"

"What?"

"No more parties," he suggested in an almost pleading manner. "At least not till after I find Paul and use him to send a message to everyone not to fucking touch you."

"I'm not your doll, Billy," I said and his face fell. "At least not yet."

Now let's get on already. I'm starving and you have a plane to make."

Billy dropped me off one block away from my house. I scanned up and down the street, fingers crossed that his father didn't glance out of a window or come outside of his house. Max's skateboard was propped against one of the fenceposts surrounding their house. I wanted so badly to tell her that her brother was okay. I wondered if they talked on the phone or wrote letters. She wouldn't be home for long. This was the part of the week where she came to pack a new bag of her belongings then disappeared to a friend's again. I couldn't blame her.

I tightened my fingers around the bag of greasy breakfast sandwiches in my grasp as I turned up the sidewalk leading to the front door of my house.

"She's home!" came my father's voice from the barely open garage door.

"Wendy? Oh thank goodness!" my mother gushed as she swung open the front door and hurried down the sidewalk. She gathered me into a tight hug that the bruises and sore aches in my body protested against. She swiped my hair out of my face and surveyed the smear of a bruise along my cheek.

"How did you get home? Did Irene drop you off? She said she would when she called last night," my mom insisted. She licked her thumb and tried to wipe away the bruise. Her eyes widened when she realized what it was.

"Who hit you?" Worry clouded her features.

"No one," I barely sidestepped her touch and started for the garage. "I fell."

I bent over to enter the garage where my dad was scrubbing at the hood of my car with a rag.

"You wanna explain this, young lady?" he asked, tone curt and struggling to hide anger. I rounded the car to find four crooked

letters spraypainted across the once spotless metal. **SLUT.**

"That Steve boy has been nothing but trouble since you dumped him," my father interjected before I could say anything.

"I think one of his little girlfriends did this," my mom crossed her arms over her chest, but I caught her gaze eyeing me up and down. I could only hope she didn't see the bruises on my wrists from beneath the sweatshirt. Billy's sweatshirt. My heart hammered hard for a few moments. She had to know it wasn't mine or Irene's.

"I'll get this cleaned up before you gotta get to school tomorrow," my dad insisted as he pushed his glasses back up his nose.

"What do you want for lunch?" my mom asked.

"Sloppy Joes!" my dad called.

"That sound alright, sweet pea?"

My head snapped in her direction. Her gaze was soft but concerned. I nodded.

"Can you holler when it's done? I think I'm gonna go to my room and nap."

6. Chapter 6

“Wendy? Time for dinner.”

I stirred just enough to hear my bedroom doorknob turn before the door squeaked open. My mom shouldered into the room, one hand holding a plate with two sloppy joe sandwiches and a can of ginger ale in the other hand.

“You weren’t kidding about taking that nap,” she said with a small laugh. I sat up and stretched beneath the indigo quilt I had made sure was covering my legs. My stomach audibly growled as she grew nearer with the sandwiches in tow.

“Let me know if I need to bring a third one. You’ve gotta feed that hangover or it’ll kill you,” she said. My eyes widened and I swallowed hard.

“How did you-“

“It’s coming out of your pores. Smelled it when I hugged you outside,” she explained as she tapped her temple with a wink. “You want a pain reliever? You’re limping. You okay?”

Those words sent last night rushing at me all over again. Paul. The party. The motel. Billy. I blinked away from her as my eyes welled with tears.

"Sweetheart?" she called. I didn't have the strength to hide it from the one woman who was always there and had always been. I drew in a deep breath then threw back the quilt. Her eyes darted over the bruises dotting my bare thighs. Her nostrils flared and I saw her jaw clench.

“What happened?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.” Paul’s airy, determined pants began to play in my ears all over again. “Just don’t tell dad. Please?”

With a small sigh, she placed the plate on my dresser before sitting on the edge of my bed by my side. Her soft hand cupped the side of

my face before she leaned in to press a kiss to my forehead. "Please talk to me."

There was so much I wanted to tell her. I wanted to gush about Billy being okay. She and dad had been concerned in the beginning after he disappeared. I felt like their responsibilities kept them from seeing just how much it affected me. I told them I was going to Irene's every time I went to a party. I never got drunk enough for anyone to smell it, or so I thought.

"What happened, Wendy?" she urged. Just as I opened my mouth to muster up the courage for an answer, the doorbell chimed from downstairs. My shoulders slumped.

"I'll be right back," she said as she pushed to her feet. She pointed a finger my way as she walked backward out of my room. "Hold that thought and keep that courage. Momma's got it."

My chin trembled until I dug my teeth into my bottom lip. It was my own fault. I had drank too much. I had gone upstairs with him in hopes that I could forget something that now I knew I never would. I tucked my nose beneath the collar of the sweatshirt and inhaled. Billy's scent was fading and quickly being replaced by my own.

"Wendy?" came my mother's voice a moment later. "Can you come downstairs?"

Concern hung heavy in her tone. Something was wrong. I stepped into a wrinkled pair of plaid pajama bottoms before carefully making my way down the staircase as quickly as my tired legs worked. The police chief stood just inside of our neat foyer with his wide fists perched on his belt.

"Chief Hopper? Mom?" I looked back and forth between the two. "What's going on?"

"This morning, I got a couple of calls in at the station about you, Wendy."

My mother looked my way, brow furrowed with concern. We both waited for the police chief to continue.

"After the Wilson's reported your car vandalized, a couple of folks say they saw you looking a bit roughed up last night. Said you were last seen with that Hargrove kid. Anything you need to tell us?"

My mother blinked a few times then looked my way.

"Billy? No, he and Wendy have been good friends," she interjected.

Hopper pursed his lips and flipped through a small notepad before tucking it into a back pocket of his khakis. "Wendy?" he urged.

"It wasn't Billy," I said. My ears burned red hot. I hadn't expected to have to confess myself to him as well. I knew he was just doing his job.

"Wendy? What's going on?" She urged. I looked back and forth between her and the chief before speaking again, this time my eyes settled on the wet condensation lining the edge of his dark boots from walking through frost-covered grass. Panic settled on my nerves and made my already nauseous stomach turn even more. I began to fidget and pluck at my fingernails.

"I went to a party. I had a little too much to drink. Paul Newton took me to a room. He shoved me on a bed and pinned me down... He ripped my stockings and tried to..." I could barely swallow against the lump in my throat.

"She's got bruises all over her legs. Look at her face too. That's enough evidence. Hop, this isn't the first time that Newton boy has had a story like this come up to you. Margaret's girl down the street?" My mother was trying her best to hide the anger welling in her face and her voice.

The police chief ran a hand over his face and let out a deep breath. "Can anyone attest to this?"

"Irene...and Billy. Billy was the one who stopped it from happening."

"Where is he? I've already been to his father's house," he jabbed a thumb over his broad shoulder. "But he says he hadn't seen him. No one has in months."

"He moved away, but he came to see me."

My mother's eyebrows skyrocketed and a hand flew to her chest.

"He moved with his father's permission?" Hopper persisted.

"Billy's responsible and old enough to live on his own. You know what happens in that house, Hopper. Come on," my mother piped up as she uncrossed her arms and stepped in front of me. "If there's anyone that needs investigating, it's Neil Hargrove and that Newman clown."

My chest flooded with warmth upon hearing my mom come to Billy's defense. Chief Hopper nodded a few times before he spoke again.

"Put something on your stomach, kid. You're looking a little green. I'll, uh, speak with Irene. That the Mason's three streets over?"

I nodded.

"And what about Paul? Leonard works with his father. Should I tell him to say something?" my mother asked. She stood against the door as he reached for the handle.

"Donna. I understand your concern, but you've gotta let me handle this. Don't tell your husband. Not yet, if you can," he glanced at me. "I'll handle it."

She moved away from the door and let him leave without another word. She closed the door behind him and looked at me with saddened eyes.

"If you wanted to go to a party instead of Irene's, you could've told me," she quietly said. "Am I... Am I unapproachable? Do you not feel safe talking to me?"

The dam behind my eyes collapsed and my body gave way to sobs. I sat on the bottom of the carpeted staircase.

"I like Billy, okay? A lot. A whole lot. When he left, I just..." I shrugged my shoulders and shook my head.

"I knew something was wrong," she quietly murmured. "Why didn't you come to me, honey?"

"I was scared. Mom, it's Billy. Everyone knows about Billy," I quickly swiped at my eyes and drew in a deep breath. "But there's more to it. There's more to him."

My mother's hard gaze went soft. She took a seat beside me and draped an arm over my slouched shoulders. "Does he know you like him? What happened last night?"

"I was able to kick Paul off me. I ran for the door and when I opened it, he was there. Billy was there. He got me out of the party. I stayed with him at a motel. He came back, mom. For me."

Her face hardened. "Did you and him...?"

I nearly scoffed in disgust. "No! No. He just... He was pissed. He wants to go after Paul, but he had to go back home. You can't tell anyone, mom. Please! His dad will find out and all hell will break loose."

"Does he like you?" There was something new in her tone.

"Yes."

The corners of her mouth twitched as she tried to hide a smile.

"What?"

She tucked her hair behind her ear and laughed to herself. "You know, your dad had a pretty bad reputation in high school, too. He went by Lenny and he was a fighter. He was always in detention. I was always staying after school to help a teacher. I bumped into Lenny one day. He was tearing up the nurse's office, looking for bandages for his broken nose. His eyes were nearly swollen shut so he couldn't see a thing. He had no idea who was helping him. Then he heard my voice at school a few days later and recognized me. His eyes lit up. The same way Billy's eyes lit up that night he ran over here after that fight with his dad and you opened the door. I know you remember that. Me, you, and your father bandaged him up in the kitchen before he took off in the night."

"Yeah," I smiled weakly. "I snuck out to check on him after you went to bed."

"There's no such thing as sneaking out in my house, sweetheart. Olive didn't start so quietly until after he fixed her for you," she said with a wink. "You genuinely like him, right? You don't want to...fix him, do you?"

"He isn't broken."